

pouring honey in my ear

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by [thanotaphobia \(blue000jay\)](#)

Summary

This relationship with Wilbur, the way Tommy's heart jumps when he walks in— definitely not healthy. But Tommy's not very well-versed in healthy relationships. He knows what they should be, yes— a take and a give, but Tommy is a taker and he's used to that. A burden for those who can't handle it.

(or, my take on the "Dark SBI" trend i've seen going around, except.... well. SBI aren't really the smooth manipulators they want to be. Tommy, on the other hand-)

Notes

"omg roxy how could you" go read the tags

:)

this au was brainrotted in clout farm server by tem and then i joined in and then like a month later this monstrosity was born. huge creds to tem for giving me the idea and support to keep it up :) all this dark sbi shit that's been making the rounds made me want to see a fic that was creepy and morally wrong but didn't (literally or figuratively) infantilize tommy. he's a smart badass who is in check of his own emotions (right?) and knows what is happening to him. the plot twist is he wants it to happen anyways and is equally possessive and bitchy in turn! enjoy<3

See the end of the work for more [notes](#)

slow down, it's a science

Family of three. Get the menus, swipe three rolls of silverware from the bucket, slap on the widest customer-service smile possible. Lead the way through pulled-out chairs, over the crunchy carpet and through the seats to the open booths. Tommy grins, a Splenda smile, and says: "I'll be your server today."

The diner is a quaint, cozy little place. Tommy had gotten the job simply by virtue of knowing the manager— Quackity, a senior when Tommy was a freshman, who'd taken him underneath his wing in the theater department and shown him the ropes. When Quackity had been promoted and they needed new hires, Tommy had been first in line. Pink and blue color schemes line the walls, black and white tiles on the floor in the kitchen with bright red, shiny, vinyl booths in the main dining area. Tommy weaves through tables and chairs packed to the brim with patrons and takes the orders, practiced and polite. The moment he steps behind the counter, though—

"Jesus fucking christ," Tommy swears, slamming down a tray full of dishware and sliding it down the line to the dishwasher. "That woman at table seventeen is a bitch."

"Language," Bad says scoldingly. Tommy scrunches his nose at him and flips him the double bird just as Niki comes through the doors.

"Tommy," she says. "Table eight wants a refill on coffee— wow, okay, rude."

"Those weren't for you!" He argues, and she laughs, a bright ringing of bells shining through the noise of the kitchen.

"Coffee," she insists, and Tommy backs his way out of the kitchen, bursting out behind the counter. Niki is busy and he can already hear the door chiming, so he just turns and glances towards the glass. The diner is set up sort of strangely— a bar counter sits across from the entrance, and Tommy has to look over the patron's heads in order to see the new arrivals. It's a busy Saturday morning— he doesn't have time to really get a good look now, so he just snags a coffee pot and makes his way to the end of the counter. Niki is usually hostess, but Tommy picks up the slack when he can.

"How many?" He asks, coffee in one hand and fingers digging through the wrapped bundles of silverware already.

"Three," a voice says, sounding mildly amused and patient. Tommy glances up.

He meets the eyes of a man with golden-brown hair, curled over his eyes. A long mouth, stretched into a smile. Behind him are two other men— one shorter, with blond hair like Tommy's, and the other pink. Whatever. Tommy won't judge. He's not allowed to dye his own hair but he doesn't fucking care what other people do. Actually, it kind of looks cool. He bites back the compliment.

“Follow me,” he says. He has to tip his head back slightly to address the guy with brown hair in front, but before he can start to lead them to an open booth, the guy shakes his head.

“We’re just gonna go grab the booth in the corner,” he says, gesturing to the far corner of the room, right under a window. Not... the seat Tommy had planned, and smack dab in the middle of his section, but– “You seem busy. Come over whenever you’ve got a moment.”

“Might be never,” Tommy risks a joke, but hey, one more table won’t kill him, right?
“Thanks, though. Have a seat.”

“Thank *you*, ” the men says, and Tommy gives him a tiny salute with two fingers as the group heads off towards the corner. It’s odd, but too odd– might be friends of Niki’s or Jack’s or Quackity’s, honestly. They get people like that sometimes. Or just presumptuous bastards. They also get those. Tommy doesn’t have time to care. Tommy’s got coffee to pour.

He honestly forgets about that table entirely for a few minutes. He’s got other things to worry about, like the woman at seventeen and the coffee at eight. And the side of home fries he forgot for table two, and then an orange juice for six. And then finally, finally, when he gets a second of a break to think, he remembers.

Only for Niki to jump right in.

He’s in the back, sliding a ticket across to Jack as he works the line and fumbles for his pen and booklet when she nudges up beside him, sliding yet another ticket to Jack herself.

“Hey,” she says, all accent and grace and composed. “The booth in the back corner– I’ll take care of it.”

“What?” Tommy glances over at her, brows furrowing, his mind going a hundred miles a minute. That’s why he likes this job– it goes fast, and so does he. A hundred things to think about a second. “It’s my section.”

“You’ve got your hands full,” she says, but it’s a weak excuse and Tommy blinks.

“I was literally about to head over now,” he says. “Did you already take their order?”

“No,” Niki says, “but let me handle them, okay?”

“What, do you think one of them’s cute or somethin’?” Tommy teases, leaning down to grin at her and watching as her face screws up.

“Ew, no,” she counters, reaching up with one hand to shove him away with a palm to the cheek. He makes an affronted noise– god, he loves Niki. “I have a girlfriend, Tommy.”

“I know, and you talk about her all the time.” Jack is waving at the both of them from behind the line. Tommy pays no mind, instead leaning up against the stainless steel and pinning Niki in his gaze. “I got the booth, Nik.”

“I’d really rather if I dealt with them,” Niki says quietly, and there’s something about her voice when she says *dealt* . Something deeper. A mystery to dig his fingers into, something

about the way her eyes go vacant for a second as she takes a plate of eggs from Jack and Tommy staunchly ignores him. “I know them. They’re... weird.”

“They’re weird? Like, what kind of weird?” Tommy ducks around the corner, still ignoring how Jack is trying to get his attention. “Like the child predator type weird? Or the, you gotta be flirty to get more tips, kind of weird?”

“Just... weird,” Niki reiterates, piling another plate of eggs onto her arm.

“If it’s the latter, then I should really be taking them,” Tommy tells her, snagging an order ticket off the line and tossing it. “I mean, I’m a big man, and you’re—”

Niki turns, pink hair pulled up so tight against her scalp Tommy could probably see the outline of her skull. She fixes him in her gaze, sharp and curious. “I’m?” She prompts.

“A girl,” Tommy finishes lamely. Then, as she finally moves away from the food station— “Look, I can handle them, okay?”

“For one,” Niki says through gritted teeth, and Tommy follows behind as she heads out behind the counter. “Just because I’m a girl doesn’t mean I can’t handle things.”

“That is *not* what I meant—”

“Two, like I said, I know them. They’re not going to— hit on me, or anything, okay? So stop doing that thing where you—” Niki stops and places a plate down in front of a customer at the counter, then another, then another in a quick row. She flashes a smile to them all, and then turns back to Tommy. “That thing where your head gets all scrunchy,” she says, reaching up and smoothing the space between Tommy’s eyebrows with a thumb. “I will take over that table. You will not complain.”

Tommy bats her hand away and glares.

“Like hell I won’t,” he says. “I will complain the most. I will be the most fucking complain-y, and you will be begging me to stop by the end of the day. Begging. I will be worse than all the Karens in the world. Don’t test me, Niki Nihachu, I can do a perfect impression. Perfect!”

“I don’t doubt you can,” Niki says, turning away from him to grab a coffee pot. Tommy sees his out, and as she keeps talking, he backs away slowly. One foot behind the other, until he’s a good few feet away and she still hasn’t noticed.

“Okay thanks Niki!” He calls out, watching her head whip around and eyes widen as she notices the booklet and pen in his hand. “I’ll-take-care-of-it-thanks-okay-bye!” All said in one breath, no time for her to argue as he bounds backwards and into the throng of mid-morning breakfast goers. Chatter fills his ears as he watches her face go red and then slump in defeat, and Tommy grins as he whirls around. Shit. He forgot water, but he can always get that for them later if they want. The booth in the back is currently his only new table, so it’ll be fine. He blatantly ignores the stares from the woman at seventeen as he passes by and instead heads right to the back corner, where he can see the brown head of hair over the back of the booth. God, that guy had been tall. Kind of freakish, honestly. Tommy comes to a stop

at the end of their table and puts on that award-winning smile, all teeth and flashing blue eyes he knows makes people think he's younger than he is.

"Sorry about the wait," he says kindly, and two heads snap to attention, while the pink one stays looking down at his phone. "Busy morning."

"We can tell," the blond one says, and Tommy flicks his pen against his notepad without losing his smile.

"Let me guess," he says, before anyone can start to order anything. It's a game he likes to play with tables, and Niki had said these guys were weird— either he's about to get ripped a new one, or they'll laugh and play along. He points his pen at the blond. "Two sugars, one cream." Then at the brown-haired guy. "You prefer milk, not cream, but prolly almond or oat 'cause you've got issues. I'd say oat, because you look the hippie type." And then while those two are still spluttering, he turns to the one with pink hair. He looks up, meeting Tommy's gaze and— woah, his eyes are almost red. Brown, sort of maroonish. Cool. Tommy licks his lips and then nods. "Black," he says. "You take it black."

Silence, except for the ambient noises of people chatting. The pink haired guy doesn't break eye contact with Tommy. He refuses to stop smiling. It's kind of unnerving.

"Actually," the pink one says. "I take four sugars, two cream."

"Damn," Tommy says. "Cavity central, okay."

"He got two out of three," the blond says. "That's not terrible."

"How the hell did you pin the oat milk?" The brown one demands, leaning forward on his elbows with a wide grin that's leaning into a laugh. Tommy smiles back. Okay, so they liked it. Good.

"Your glasses," he says, gesturing with the pen. "Everyone with round frames is some kind of hipster, hippie type."

"He's got you there, Will," the blond one says, leaning back in his seat and laughing. It's the kind of laugh that makes Tommy want to laugh with him, but he bites his tongue before he can. "Damn."

"Now that coffee orders are out of the way," Tommy says lightly, still smiling but a bit softer now. "What can I get for you guys?"

"Not going to guess?" The pink one drawls. Tommy shakes his head.

"I'm not as good with food," he says. "Only coffee."

"In that case," the brown haired one interrupts— what had the other one said, Will? His name was Will, probably. "I'll get the spinach and mushroom omelet, cheddar, with whole wheat toast."

"Home fries?"

“No, thanks.”

The blond smiles when Tommy looks at him. “Pancakes, strawberries. Side of bacon.” Tommy scribbles it down and finally, turns to the pink one again. He’s staring at Tommy again with those reddish eyes, and so Tommy stares back, unblinking. There’s silence for a moment, and then the man lifts his chin a bit.

“All-American,” he says. “Eggs over easy, rye bread, bacon.”

“Got it,” Tommy says, scribbling it down with ease. He gives them all another award-winning smile once more, flashing it around the table as he tucks his notebook into his pocket. “I’ll get that right in for you. You guys want water?”

“Please,” the blond says, and Tommy nods. “Thank you.”

“My pleasure,” he says gracefully, and then dips from the table. Back through the weaving mess, he snags table seventeen’s check as he goes and sneers at the tip. What a bitch. His service is perfect. When he gets to the line and slips the ticket over for the food, snagging a coffee pot and three mugs, Niki is glaring at him lightly.

“What?” He asks, slipping a handful of creamers and sugar into his pockets as he prepares to go back over. “I told you I got it handled.”

Niki just sighs, long and blubbery through her mouth and nose, and Tommy grins as he turns away.

The rest of his shift flies by without incident. He brings the supposedly “weird” table their coffees and keeps up to date, joking with them and laughing every time. He’s rewarded at the end of it with a crisp thirty bucks tucked under the blond one’s coffee mug, and Tommy grins as he pockets it and feels the paper between his fingers. Niki scolds him that day as he hangs up his apron, something about listening and not sticking his nose into places where it doesn’t belong, but he shrugs her off and shoves his arms into his jacket sleeves and gives her a hug before he heads home.

It’s only afternoon when he slips through his front door and into the hall, which means that Dream’s still at work and Tommy’s got time to himself. Blessed, even though he’s got homework and shit to do. Working is exhausting, and he’s been at the diner since like 4:30 this morning. So he crashes into bed without even kicking off his sneakers and sets an alarm clumsily for an hour, and closes his eyes. It’ll just be a quick nap. A nap, then he can do his homework and make something to eat before Dream gets home. Just an hour.

And, well.

Tommy wakes up to a hand in his hair and cold floor stinging against his face.

“Wake up,” Dream says, and Tommy catches himself with an elbow and a wrist, wincing as it stings. “Your alarm has been going off since I walked in the door.”

“Ow,” Tommy grimaces, glancing up at the dress shoes in front of him and then up further, until he meets Dream’s gaze. He’s on the floor— still in his work clothes, and his alarm clock is beeping and he’s hazy with sleep but he can see that outside there is a setting sun. He bites back his instinctual ‘oh shit’ and scrambles to his knees. “I’m— sorry. Sorry.”

“When did you get home?” Dream asks, and shoes clip against the floor of his bedroom as Dream moves, rounding the bed to slam his hand down on his alarm clock and stop the incessant beeping. Holy shit, he’d really just slept through it for like, five hours.

“Um,” he says, and then scrabbles to stand, fighting back the exhaustion still lingering in order to get an answer out. Dream hates it when he can’t answer. “One?”

“And what time is it?”

Tommy’s eyes flick to his clock. “Four-thirty.”

“Three and a half hours.” Dream turns back to him and shoves his hands into his pockets, rocking back and forth on his heels. “Really, Tommy?”

“It’s Saturday,” he says, toeing off his own shoes and kicking them under his bed with a shuffle. He watches as Dream tracks his movement, but doesn’t reach out or scold. His scowl just worsens a bit. “I thought, uh. I thought I would wake up.”

“Clearly.” Dream gestures. “You didn’t.”

“I’m sorry,” Tommy whispers, dropping his eyes to the floor and waiting. Dream huffs. He swallows. “Did you... just get home?”

“Yes, Tommy.”

“How was work?”

“It was long. I’m assuming you didn’t make anything to eat.”

“There’s... leftovers. In the fridge. You can have them.”

“I think I’ll just make a sandwich. People suffer when you fuck up, Tommy. Homework?”

“It’ll get done.”

“Good.” A hand lands on his head and ruffles, and Tommy gnaws on his lip. “Do you work tomorrow?”

“Yeah. Afternoon.”

“Don’t bother coming to breakfast, then.” Dream’s always been the one to make breakfast—he makes breakfast, Tommy makes dinner. It’s how things work, usually. Usually, when Tommy doesn’t fuck up their routine or one of them is working, late or early. He cringes as Dream steps past him, fingers curling around the knob on his door. “Sleep in, since clearly you need it.”

“Dream, wait,” he says, turning around as the older man begins to shut the door. “I’m really sorry—”

“You’re always sorry, Tommy,” Dream tells him simply, and then shuts the door with a resounding slam. He stares at it, the grain of the wood traveling up and down. There’s the spot where Dream put his hand through the door and they had to patch it. There’s the spot where when Tommy was thirteen, they’d gotten into a screaming match and in the ensuing fight, Tommy’s fingers had gotten slammed in between the frame and door. He’d broken three of them. At the bottom some of the wood is cracked from where Tommy had kicked it when he was twelve. And of course, just under the handle is one big empty space, a hole through the wood where there used to be a lock. Not anymore. If Tommy were to lean down and put his face up to it, he’d be able to see right through. He has before.

From outside, he hears the sound of a deadbolt as it clicks shut.

Well. He had math homework to do anyway. Dinner is for posers.

Birds, chirping. Birds chirping right in his ear, stupid motherfuckers, can’t they see some people are trying to sleep—

A pillow lands on the floor with a muffled thump, Tommy reaching up to scrub at his eyes as he glares at the window.

His alarm clock reads half past eleven. When he slinks out of bed to the door, he finds it unlocked. The rest of the house is thankfully quiet and empty as he shuffles into the bathroom and turns on the shower. He’s got time before work, so cleaning and eating and brushing teeth and pulling on new socks is in store. By the time the clock on the cream-colored stove reads twelve-thirty, Tommy’s stuffing his feet into his shoes and slinging his backpack over his back and heading out into the sun. An apple between his teeth that crunches and crushes satisfyingly, juice dripping down between his fingers that he licks away and launches the core into the woods. The diner isn’t far— a short walk away from where he and Dream live in the suburbs, through downtown to the other end of the main street. He passes by a few shops as he goes and swings into the convenience store— it’s the one he’s been going to since he was eight and had moved here, with it’s friendly face at the register and selection of various goods to purchase, like candy and chips. Tommy snags a protein bar and a juice and slams them onto the counter, Sam giving Tommy a smile as he does.

“Good morning, Tommy,” he says kindly. Everything Sam does is kind. Behind him is the pharmacy, and after Sam says good morning there’s a squeal from behind the shelves.

“Hi Tommy!!!” Ponk calls out, “Good morning!”

“Ow do,” Tommy says back. “It’s afternoon, I think.”

“We both know you barely just got up,” Sam teases, and Tommy grins. Sam and Ponk are his favorites and they know it (Tommy had only been nine when they’d gotten married, and hadn’t been allowed to go, but they’d given him an invitation anyways and saved a flower vase for him. He’d kept it in his room long after it had wilted).

“Shut up,” he says, leaning onto the plastic counter. “I gotta get to work, hurry up and ring me up, Sammy-boy.”

“Sure thing, Tommy-boy,” Sam says, and the cash register dings as he does. Tommy slides over a ten. “When you workin’ til?”

“Nine,” Tommy says. “We’re kinda short staffed.”

“If I see anyone looking for a job I’ll send them Q’s way, then,” Sam says, and slides Tommy’s items back to him one-by-one. There’s a TV above Sam’s head, blaring the local news station. Something about a woman’s body found by a roadside, a suspected trucker, blah blah blah. Tommy gives it two seconds of his attention before glancing back at Sam.

“Yeah?” He asks. “Thanks, big man.”

“Anytime.” Sam salutes him, and then slides over his change. “Tell Niki I say hi.”

“Sure!” Tommy stuffs the change back into his pocket with a smile— below the rolling news bulletin the clock says it’s 12:49, and so he’s gotta go if he doesn’t want to be late. “See you!” With a jingle of a bell, the door shuts behind him, and Tommy tears into his impromptu breakfast before bolting down the street. The diner comes into view as he turns the corner, and for a moment, mouth half-full and heart well on it’s way to satisfaction, life is good.

“Are you fucking kidding me?”

Tommy stares down at his shoes, now soaked in coffee and drinks, and the ever-spreading stain on the carpet below him. Glasses lay strewn across the floor, shattered and broken, indistinguishable from the cubes of ice around them. Tommy takes a step back, and every eye in the establishment is on him, he knows it. After all, he’s the idiot that just dropped a whole fucking tray of drinks all over himself. Thankfully no patrons, but Tommy is already feeling the flush of embarrassment on his ears and neck. There’s a hand on his shoulder and then Niki is there— oh bless fucking Niki— and Skeppy is too, with a towel for Tommy’s front and people start talking again. The silence is broken and chatter resumes, Tommy staring angrily at the floor so he doesn’t look angrily anywhere else.

He’d landed wrong on his wrist last night, he knows it. It keeps aching and twinging with pain, and he’d thought it had been okay but when he’d picked up the tray and had to shift, stumbled— it had given out on him with a sharp whip-like knotting ache. He’s holding it now in one hand, Skeppy clumsily patting his shirt around them both.

“Are you hurt?” Niki asks gently, appearing in front of him.

“No,” Tommy says, then shudders through a breath. The entire room feels tight. It’s like he can’t breathe, and his heart is racing, and— oh shit. Fuck. No no no.

The door jingles. People come in. Niki can see the panic before Tommy can even verbalize it and turns him away. Over the sea of eyes glancing at him, Tommy sees a familiar trio of heads just by the door. He barely has time to process three sets of questioning eyes before Niki is nudging him into the back, past the line and past the dishwasher, into the stock rooms and the big door to the freezer. Tommy focuses on it, the frost creeping around the edges of the window, and tries to breathe. It’s coming stuttery and off-kilter, but it’s coming, and his jackrabbiting heart is calming some as Niki’s hands press firmly against his shoulders and arms.

“Fuck,” he manages to say through the violent shaking in his entire body. “Sorry.”

“Don’t apologize,” Niki says, because this is not the first time Niki has seen this, unfortunately. It’s great for Tommy now, because she is so fucking comforting and her hands are warm and confident against his shoulders, the pressure a blessing. But later-Tommy will be mortified by how he sinks into it, head against her temple and eyes closing as he shakes.

“I’m sorry,” he says again. Honestly it’s just to be contradictory.

“It was just a few glasses,” Niki says quietly. “We can get them for 49 cents. Not even a huge deal.”

“Fuck,” Tommy says quietly. “Shit. Piss. Balls.”

Niki laughs warmly. “Does that make you feel better?”

“Yes,” he says honestly. “Yeah. Cock and balls.”

“You are awful,” she mutters, but it’s in that way that means she doesn’t mean it. Slowly, the feeling returns to Tommy’s hands and the shaking subsides. Niki keeps pressing on his shoulders, voice low and soft, and when he blinks them open again she’s watching him with a tiny smile on her cracked but glossy lips. “Hi.”

“Hey,” he says. His mouth is dry. “I, uh—”

“Don’t apologize,” she cuts in quickly. “It’s fine. Are you okay?”

Tommy takes stock of himself. His fingers are all attached. The front of his apron and uniform are still kind of wet and sticky, and so are his shoes. He can hear the ambient sounds of people talking and dishware clinking in the dining room beyond, and lets out a shaky breath. He’s fine. The panic is mostly gone, and his heart is still beating fast, but no longer racing like it was.

“I’m good,” he decides. “I, uh. That was shitty of me. So sorry.”

“I said you’re fine,” Niki tells him, sighing, but she’s still smiling. “I’m glad you’re okay. Think you can get back out there?”

Tommy takes stock of himself for a second time. “Yeah,” he says. “Yeah, I think I’m good.”

“You can go home if you need to—”

“No.” God, no, home would be a thousand times worse. “No, no, I’m good. Piss and shit and cock and balls. It’s all out of my system now, see? Totally fine.”

“Why don’t you take five minutes,” Niki says anyway, brows furrowing. “A breather.”

“Nah,” he says. “It’s busy out there. I’m not leaving you to fend the wolves off yourself.”

“Tommy—”

“I’m fine,” he insists, and maybe it comes out sharper than he means it too. Niki frowns now, all worry and concern. “Seriously. I’m poggers.”

“Poggers.”

“Super poggers.”

Niki shakes her head at him, laughing slightly, and lets go of his shoulders. Tommy breathes out the tiniest of laughs. “Fine,” she says. “Fine. But I’ll remake the drinks. You go take orders and refill coffees. Check in on your tables. Got it?”

“Yes ma’am,” Tommy says, because he can at least take that. No more heavy lifting, at least not right now. He’s content to just step back out behind the bar and scan his area, Niki behind him and glasses clinking. Skeppy’s gotten most of the glass already apparently, the broom in hand as he scans the ground and Bad coming by with a smile and a comforting little pat to Tommy’s shoulder. He switches out his apron real quick— aw fuck, his notepad is *ruined*— and pats himself down the best he can before heading back out. There had been people, he thinks, walking in just as he’d been led into the back. A quick scan of the room confirms that, and it’s the back booth, the one from yesterday. Same three heads of hair, same three sets of eyes that flicker his way as he makes his way up to the table. Shoulders back, smile on. Tommy’s good at pretending everything’s fine.

“Ow do, gentlemen,” he says, channeling boisterous and cacophonous and all the other SAT vocabulary words he can think of that mean *loud*. “What can I do for you today?”

The diner two days in a row is a little strange, but Tommy’s not going to call them out on it. Maybe it’s a family thing. Besides, they do have regulars that come in every day, but that’s usually just in the morning and only single people. This is a whole group and as he scans them, yep. Same as yesterday. Blondie, the tall brown haired one he thinks is named Will, and the pink one with red eyes.

“Hiya, mate,” the blond one says. “How are you?”

Oh, so they’re the *polite* kind of customers. Tommy hums.

“Could be better,” he admits, because every time he takes a step his shoes squelch with a watery mixture of soda. “And you?”

“Good,” says the blond one.

“I’m Wilbur,” says the one— oh, so it’s Wilbur and not Will. Tommy squints.

“Wil,” the pink one groans. “Really?”

“What?” Wilbur turns to face the other, gesturing with one hand. Two days and Tommy already knows that Wilbur is loud in his personal bubble— hands flying everywhere, rocking back and forth, shifting constantly. Case in point: he scoots all the way to the end of the booth and grins at Tommy. Tommy smiles back. “We already know his name. Tommy. Seems rude, doesn’t it? Almost invasive.”

Hm. Tommy is definitely not wearing his nametag. It had been on his other apron, the one currently soaked with drinks. He glances down and back up to check, and Wilbur must catch the look.

“Oh, we saw it yesterday,” he explains. “Personally I think servers should have the option to stay anonymous. It’s really quite rude, to get to know their names and have them never know ours. And someone could just look you up and boom! Stalker. Never liked name tags.”

“You’re a priss,” Tommy has decided. He turns to the pink one as Wilbur stutters, left gaping at where Tommy had been standing before he shifted a foot to the left. “How can I help you?”

“Technoblade,” the pink one says— oh, for fuck’s sake. Tommy scowls, finally letting his smile drop. “All-American, please. Over-easy, rye toast, bacon.”

“Sure thing.” Tommy scribbles it down. “Technoblade’s a weird name.”

“It’s his gamer tag,” Wilbur supplies helpfully. Tommy suppresses a snort of laughter as Technoblade goes the tiniest bit red in the face, and then he turns to the blond one.

“I apologize for my sons,” he says before Tommy can even open his mouth to ask what he wants. “And following the theme, my name is Phil. We used to be regulars here, years ago. Back when they were younger.”

“Oh yeah?” Tommy asks, raising a brow. Regulars. Maybe that’s how Niki knew they were weird.

“We just moved back into the area,” Phil says apologetically, smiling at him in a way that looks sad. Although, with his downturned eyes, Tommy thinks the man just might always look sad. “So unfortunately we might be regulars again.”

“Wonderful,” Tommy grits out. He shoves a smile back on his face, and he finds it... isn’t that hard to do. Phil smiles back, and Technoblade has pulled his head from his hands and Wilbur is glaring across the table at him. “What can I get you?” He asks.

“Banana pancakes. Home fries,” Phil asks. They had been good tippers yesterday— Tommy nods, then closes up his notepad with a flourish and stuffs his pen away.

“I’ll get those right in!” He chirps, and Wilbur blinks as Tommy starts to turn away, reaching out. His hand hovers between them and Tommy slows, only for a second. His shoes are still squishing. Ew.

“Hey, wait!” Wilbur says. “What about me?”

“You’ll be having the Tommy special,” Tommy informs him, glancing back over his shoulder and giving all three of them his wide, Splenda smile. “Starve.”

And with that, he flees back into the kitchen so he can peel his socks off.

He doesn’t let Wilbur starve, truthfully— he recalls what the man had ordered yesterday (a mushroom spinach omelet) and puts that in for him. He busies himself in order not to face the trio for a while, bussing other tables and stacking dishes into a bin to carry back to the dishwasher, but he can’t avoid them forever. He can feel their eyes on the back of his head, and soon enough, Jack is ringing up their ticket and Tommy is sliding their plates onto his arm. Careful, careful— it’s all that’s ringing through his mind as he makes his way through the tables to the back booth.

“All-American,” he says, then slides Phil’s plate over to him, and then finally places Wilbur’s down. The guy looks down at it, then up at Tommy.

“I thought I was going to starve,” he says, and when Tommy finally gains the courage enough to look at him head-on, he’s smiling. Just a tiny quirk of his mouth, but enough.

“I decided mercy,” Tommy informs him.

“At least he didn’t drop it,” Technoblade cuts in, and Phil sighs as Tommy feels his ears going extremely red. Stomach sinking, pure fucking humiliation.

“Techno,” Phil says scoldingly, and Wilbur snorts.

“What?” Wilbur asks. “It happened, like, right as we walked in—”

“Enjoy your meals,” Tommy grits out, and then turns on his heel (no longer squishing so much) and stalks off. His eyes burn along with his chest, that same kind of panic rising up whenever he thinks about it too much. Of course they’d bring it up— it’s not humiliating enough for it to just happen, but for them to take a dig at it, well. He’s scowling by the time he reaches the line, and Jack Manifold whistles at him, which makes him scowl harder.

“Fuck off,” he says.

“Someone’s angry,” Jack says. He’s got a spatula in one hand. Tommy wishes he could pry it from his fingers and whap him over the head with it.

“My shoes are wet,” Tommy says, dragging his words out and letting his voice get all *slow* and *patient*. “And one of my tables is full of little bitches, and I am having a frankly, terrible day.”

“So sorry to hear, mate,” Jack says cheerfully. “Want some bacon?”

Tommy's stomach growls aimlessly. "Yeah," he says. "Actually, yeah."

"I'll ring you up a plate," Jack says and Tommy watches him duck down in order to get something sizzling on the grill. He leans against the cool metal and presses his forehead into it, watching aimlessly.

"You good?" Niki calls as she ducks into the back.

"Fine," he calls back out.

"Okay, good," Niki says. "Quackity's on his way."

Tommy lets out the most unholy noise. "Kill me," he requests. "Please?"

"Sorry," Niki laughs, and then the door swings shut with a squeal and Jack hums, sliding a plate of bacon out in front of him. Tommy reaches up, ignoring how the meat burns his fingers and leaves greasy stains on them as he shoves it into his mouth. Ow, hot. Worth it.

"You'll be a'ight," Jack says companionably. As Skeppy passes by behind him, he slaps Tommy on the back and nearly chokes him.

"I hate you," Tommy says cheerfully, swallowing through his mouthful of meat and shoving the rest into his mouth. He's got tables to serve.

He ignores the trio in the back until their plates are clean and eyes aren't looking at him—none of them look at him, honestly, and he's glad for it. He can focus on other things, like wrapping silverware and refilling coffees and orders full of hot dogs and fries and burgers. It's the lunch wave, and while some people order breakfast still others are more interested in other foods. By the time two-thirty rolls around, Tommy's served a gazillion different dishes and not spilled another drink. Quackity's also arrived, ducking into the back before Tommy even gets a chance to say hi, too busy with his tables. Then things start slowing down, and people start leaving and finally, finally he manages to slip the check to the back booth. He's in and out, a clean operation, smooth navigator—Tommy slips them the check, comes back a few minutes later to empty seats and clean plates and another \$20 tip on top of their change.

Well. At least they didn't stiff him or some shit. He slips it into his pocket without hassle.

Two-thirty turns to three, turns to four, turns to five. A dinner rush, and then six, and then seven. Less people, emptier tables. The stain on the carpet where Tommy had dropped the glasses is lighter now, but still damp. His shoes are still uncomfortable. The sun has set and outside is dark, the lights of cars driving by and street lamps casting golden shadows onto the walls of the diner, lit bright by fluorescents.

And then:

"Hey Tommy," Q says, and his fingers still where he's wrapping up silverware in napkins. "How's it goin', man?"

Oh boy. Tommy turns, and Quackity is leaning against the counter with a smile.

“Hey, Q,” he says, plastering a smile on his face. “You know.”

“Hell yeah,” he says. “Long day?”

“Long day,” Tommy nods, glancing back down and finishing up the silverware. He sets it aside. “What’s up?”

“Just wanted to check in on you,” he says. “Niki said you had a panic attack earlier.”

“I wouldn’t call it a panic attack, now,” Tommy argues, turning to lean his butt against the counter and cross his arms. “That’s a bit much. Really, a bit much.”

“Dude, it’s cool.” Quackity shrugs. “Everyone fucks up sometimes. I just wanted to make sure you’re okay.”

“I’m fine,” Tommy says. “Really. Why is everyone so fuckin’ concerned?” He’s a little relieved for sure. Q isn’t reaming him out– not that he thought he would, but still. Quackity is his boss, even if he was a friend first.

“Hey man, just wanted to check in. It’s my job.” Quackity holds his hands up, and then reaches out to pat Tommy on the shoulder. “I’ll hang around tonight if you want?”

“Jack and I should be fine.” Closing wasn’t fun, but at least he didn’t have to do it alone. Quackity stares at him and Tommy stares back, before finally heaving a sigh.

“Alright,” he says. “If you’re sure you’re fi–”

“I’m fine!” Tommy nudges his hand away, grinning and spreading his arms wide. “Peachy!”

Quackity regards him, and then sighs. “Alright. Okay. Okay! I’m takin’ you off the schedule for tomorrow, though.”

“If it makes you feel better,” Tommy grunts, shoving down his pang of disappointment (more time at home, then. Great) and instead shrugs it off, gnawing on his lip. “Sure.”

“I know you want hours, but it’ll be good for you,” Quackity continues, and Tommy zones out. He’s tired. He doesn’t want to listen, doesn’t want to pay attention. Q’s lips keep moving and he asks something and Tommy just nods– he’s tired. He’s so fucking tired. So he just nods and agrees and smiles until finally Quackity stops talking, claps him on the shoulder, and heads into the back.

For a while, things are quiet. He’s pretty sure he’s watching himself from the outside, running through the motions and getting things done. The hours tick by and people file out– eventually, there is no one left in the building but him and Jack, and Tommy busies himself with various menial tasks. Wiping down glasses, mopping the floor in the back, wetting a rag and wiping down the tables. Stacking chairs.

Eight fifty-six. Tommy tears his eyes away from the clock and down at the bar counter below him, scrubbing stubbornly at a coffee ring like it might make it disappear.

Eight fifty-nine.

Nine o'clock.

The door jingles.

Tommy whips his head up, a snarl already in his throat as he gets ready to tell off whoever just walked in, but it freezes in his throat. Wilbur— one of the trio— has walked back in, a smile on his face and glasses down at the tip of his nose. His hair is low over his eyes. Tommy scowls, snapping back into himself with a jolt and throwing down his towel.

“We’re closed,” he snaps.

“I wanted to apologize,” Wilbur says, and Tommy scowls harder.

“We’re *closed*,” he says again.

“I know, I know.” Wilbur sits anyway, wobbling on the bar stool and it’s shiny blue plastic seat. “But I really wanted to apologize for earlier.”

“It’s no big deal,” Tommy grumps, looking away and down at the counter. He trails his hand over it, then keeps sweeping his damp rag over it. It streaks. “Whatever, seriously.”

“It was rude,” Wilbur says. “And I apologize.”

“I’ve dealt with worse,” Tommy says because he has. When he looks up, Wilbur is staring at him with an unreadable expression. “What, bitch?”

“Are you always this rude to customers?” Wilbur asks, and Tommy scowls at him.

“Just the dickheads,” he says. “Ones that stay past closing.”

“It’s nine oh three,” Wilbur says, and Tommy flips him off cleanly. “Do you need a ride home?”

“Excuse me?” Tommy blinks. “I— no. No I do not.”

“It’s dark and late,” Wilbur says. “Are you sure?” Even if Tommy did want a ride, he wouldn’t take one from this fucker. No way. He shakes his head. Jack could give him one if he asked, but he’s not going to ask, because he likes the walk and doesn’t want to explain why Jack has to drop him off a block away from his home.

“Positive,” Tommy says, rolling his eyes. “Get out, please.”

“Alright, alright, I’m going.” Wilbur is smiling, raising his hands in surrender and sliding off the stool. “I’m Wilbur, by the way. Watson-Soot.”

“You said earlier,” Tommy says, eyeing him warily. “Tommy.”

“Tommy...?”

“Tommy Not-In-The-Habit-Of-Giving-My-Last-Name-Out-To-Strange-Weird-Fuckheads.”

“That is an awfully long last name.”

“Yeah, it’s shit to fill out on standardized tests.”

And then both of them are laughing, a smile spreading across Tommy’s face before he can stop himself. He trails off the laughter haltingly, fingers stuttering to a stop as he finishes wiping down the counter and stares at Wilbur. Wilbur, who is still smiling and his shoulders still shaking as he chuckles.

“Goodnight, Tommy,” he says.

“Night.” Tommy watches as the door opens and then shuts, the bell jingling cheerfully. He stands there for a long moment, staring after Wilbur out into the night and just... thinks. Thinks. His mind isn’t even really going, he’s just standing there and staring until Jack Manifold appears at his shoulder and scares the shit out of him with:

“Who was that then, ey?”

Things start to... change after that.

Tommy starts to see Wilbur everywhere. Not out of work— just in. The man comes in every other day now, sitting either in the Watson-Soot booth, as he calls it, or by himself at the bar. Nearly every shift of Tommy’s sees the man coming in around one or two— or, if Tommy’s working a morning shift, ten or eleven. He’s not sure how the man knows, but he does, and so he sees him. Serves him. Occasionally, jokes with him.

Wilbur’s... kind of funny.

And okay, maybe Tommy doesn’t talk to many people outside of work and Sam’s shop, but that’s not his fault. So what if he starts to laugh more at Wilbur’s jokes, if he starts to— gasp— look forward to the man coming in. He’s funny. He’s nice.

He’s *really* nice. Almost creepily so. He tips Tommy twenty bucks consistently no matter what he orders, and he compliments him on the simplest things. A haircut. A well-timed joke. Tommy has spent enough time with Dream to recognize the insincerity when it’s there, but the thing is... it’s *not* there. Wilbur is well and truly infatuated, and Tommy is confused until he’s not. Wilbur wants to be his friend. Wilbur, after one comment about how similar they look, wants to be *brothers* .

And Tommy does too. Family is confusing and wrong and awful to Tommy, but Wilbur is good. He wants to keep him. It’s like finding a dog on the side of the road, Tommy thinks. A good thing in the midst of concrete, steel, and smoke. Wilbur is a dog and Tommy is reeling

him in with little quips here and there, treats of knowledge, watching as the praise comes pouring in.

It comes to a head one late night, when Tommy's working a slow Thursday. Wilbur's voice is interested, tone content: "What year are you in again?"

"Senior year," Tommy says, and he's preening under the attention. He never gets shit like this at home— Dream expects good grades, expects Tommy to be good all the time. Praise from him is few and far between, but Wilbur is just lavishing it on him without a single care in the world. Tommy grins, all teeth. "I'm graduating second in my class."

"Damn!" Wilbur's hand hits the table and Tommy barely bites back his flinch, leaning back some and curling his fingers around one another. "That's aces, Tommy!"

"It's not first," he says, drawing back a little. He's not shy, not ashamed— but it's worth it to see the way Wilbur's eyes soften, the way he smiles like he's trying to tame a wild kitten. Attention. Tommy swallows and pretends like he doesn't care, avoiding Wil's gaze and shrugging. "I could do better."

"Second in your class and you could do better?" Wilbur asks, splaying his fingers out against the cool laminate countertop. His coffee has long gone cold. Tommy thinks about topping it up again, but in the end he doesn't move. "Do you get scholarship for it?"

"A bit," he says. "Valedictorian gets a free ride to the state school. Which is why I could be doing better." Dream would love it if he didn't have to pay for Tommy's school— Tommy would love it if he could get by on his own. No more ties back to him, nothing holding him in place. No debts. Wilbur's eyes are sharp as he surveys Tommy, and after a second he shrugs. "Not that I was planning on college, honestly."

"Not planning on college?"

"There are better things that I could be doing."

"Not really, *sugar* ." Wilbur picks up a packet of Splenda and chucks it at Tommy, laughing when the teenager bats it away with a disgruntled hand. "College would be good for you. You could get out of this town."

Tommy is still preening under the praise. Maybe he can get a bit more out of Wilbur. "I 'unno. I don't think I'd be... good at it."

"You're second in your class," Wilbur says, staring at him with a half-open mouth. "Tommy, you would be *amazing* ."

Oh, purr. Tommy likes that tone, the reverent sort of admiration in Wilbur's voice. He continues, unaware of Tommy's own thoughts. "I was like— fiftieth in my classes. I fuckin' dropped out of college, in the end. You're second and smart as a whip and telling me you wouldn't do good in college? Liar." The last insult is said fondly, and Tommy just ducks his head and shrugs. Wilbur scoffs. "Puh-lease. Seriously. You'd do amazing. Did you want to go in-state?"

Depends. If it means staying near Wilbur, yes. But there's another desire in his gut, the urge to *run run run* away from Dream and never come back.

"Not sure yet," he says, gnawing on his lip. It's the truth, if anything.

"That's fair," Wilbur hums. "It took forever for Techno to make up his mind."

Tommy hums back, and then to his utmost disappointment, a car pulls into the parking lot, headlights cutting bright golden beams through the windows as the sun continues its slow but steady march up above the horizon. The clock is slowly ticking, and Tommy is almost surprised to find it's almost 5:30. He's been talking to Wilbur for an hour, Jesus Christ. "Welp. Here comes a crowd."

"A valiant soldier," Wilbur says. Tommy pauses, lingers— he can see how Wilbur's gaze drags over him, aching. After a second, Tommy turns, snagging one of the coffee pots from the machines and leans over the counter in order to top off Wil's mug. Then, without even looking at the older man, he snags two packets of sugar from the container and rips them open, dumping the contents into the drink. Reaches under the counter, just a dash of oatmilk. He plops a spoon in, and stirs. He can feel Wil watching him, but neither of them say anything as he slides the mug over, steaming, just the way Wilbur takes it.

The bell rings. Tommy blinks, and smiles, customer-service voice kicking in before he can stop himself. "Sit anywhere you like, be right there."

Wilbur is watching him. Tommy shies away from it, but not because he doesn't like it. Oh no. It's just more fun this way, watching Wilbur chase.

He's already Tommy's. The decision's been made for him. It's just a matter of time now until he realizes, and Tommy cannot *wait*.

It's probably not healthy.

The thought hits him late one night when he's nursing a bruise on his arm and ribs, ice pack cold against his irritated skin and staring at the dark wall as he listens to Dream pace in the other room.

(To be fair, he'd deserved this bruise. Deserved the way he'd cried on the floor as every breath had ached, deserved how Dream had shouted at him and told him he was fucking useless. Because he is. Even his paychecks don't help enough with the bills, the debts. Tommy tries to help but he never quite makes it— Dream sees through the thin veneer he puts up and pulls it down to reveal the truth of Tommy: a clingy, co-dependent bastard who *needs* and never gives.)

This relationship with Wilbur, the way Tommy's heart jumps when he walks in— definitely not healthy. But Tommy's not very well-versed in healthy relationships. He knows what they should be, yes— a take and a give, but Tommy is a taker and he's used to that. A burden for those who can't handle it.

He thinks of the twenty dollar bills in Wilbur's hand, crisp as though he'd just gotten them from the ATM simply for the purpose of giving it to Tommy. Yeah. He's a taker, not a giver.

But Wilbur doesn't care, does he? Tommy breathes, chest aching as it moves up and down, up and down, and he thinks. Tommy is selfish. Tommy wants Wilbur. Tommy wants him as a friend, as a brother, and the only thing he knows about wanting is selfishness and possession.

So he'll make Wilbur his. It's easy. It's gotta be easy— Dream does it without hesitation, makes things his. Tommy is Dream's, at the moment, but Tommy wants Wilbur and it's all very confusing, so Tommy rolls over and goes to sleep.

He'll figure it out later. He's got time.

gushing gold

Chapter Notes

twos this chapter: physical abuse

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Tommy doesn't think he knows how to love.

It hits him when he's standing at the counter at home, arms elbow-deep in warm soapy water, eyes staring blankly at the stained wall in front of him. The sink is dripping just slightly, and the sound is getting to him. Behind him, Dream's pen scratches against paperwork as he works at the kitchen table. It's a day off for him; never a day off for Dream, of course, but it's a Friday night now and Tommy doesn't have work and his teachers were kind enough to not give them a ton of homework for the weekend so he stands here, washes dishes, and contemplates the fact he doesn't think he's capable of loving.

He can remember watching the movies (Hallmark ones, the ones that roll out around Christmas and Valentine's Day) with Dream on the couch. He'd always make a face when the couple got together and Dream would laugh at him— not in a mean way, just in a teasing way, especially since Tommy was younger. When things were better. Those movies had always drawn love out to be a powerful thing, the call of fate that you can't ignore. Love in those movies sounded like echoey laughter and smelled like warm wood counters on a sunny day. It was open kitchen windows and sunflowers, it was red hearts and kissy faces and arms around shoulders. Tommy knew, in theory, what love was. He knew romance wasn't everything— brothers loved brothers and sisters and fathers loved sons, usually with fists and belts. He knew friends loved each other, and he supposes he loves Niki and Jack and Sam and Ponk and Quackity— but did he? He thinks of aborted attempts of touch and distancing himself, because he knows what happens when you get too close.

Tommy thinks love is meaner than Hallmark wants it to be. Less sparks, more fire. Or at least, Tommy thinks he feels love wrong. He feels it like waves crashing against a ship's boards, maybe like fireworks. Maybe like when you're making pasta and you put your hand over the steam by accident and burn yourself.

Tommy thinks love is when you put a coffee down in front of someone and they turn it around and spill it on you, still hot, still steaming, burning.

Everyone he's ever truly loved, he thinks, has left. His mother (unknown variable), his father (even more of an unknown variable, honestly). That one kid he'd bunked with in the group home when he was six— he can't remember his name now, only that he'd had bright green eyes and a gap in his front teeth and that every night before Tommy went to sleep, the kid would punch his arm and leave a bruise. Then Dream came and took him. And whatever love

Tommy thought he felt in the beginning had morphed and twisted into some sick rendition of itself, aching and utterly unfair.

He's probably broken. Nobody *else* stands staring at walls and ponders over whether or not they're a fuckin' sociopath.

What was that one saying? If you have to ask about it or ponder it at all, it's probably true? No, wait, that's about being gay. Tommy scowls absently and scrubs harder at a spot on their pan, glaring at it like he can melt it off with the heat behind his eyes. Yeah, he's definitely broken.

"I'm going to bed," he tells Dream after he places the last dish in the drying rack, letting out the water and watching it swirl down. Dream merely hums as he goes and Tommy blesses it, because Dream's love is a slap to the face and side eye, if he's lucky. "Goodnight."

"Goodnight, Tommy," Dream mutters, and leans further over the table. Tommy escapes to his room without incident, so that's a win in his book.

But the thoughts from earlier don't leave his mind— he lays in bed and stares at the ceiling with tired eyes, burning from how heavy they are. Love. Tommy tries to scrounge up one moment in the past week when he'd felt love, and he finds only two separate occasions: one had been when Niki had calmed him down from the panic attack. Understandable. The second had been every single time Tommy had made Wilbur Watson-Soot laugh. And not just giggle— the real laugh that has him cackling, head thrown back and mouth open wide. That had felt like the kind of love from the movies— cinnamon and absinthe, real.

Wilbur Watson-Soot felt like love. Weird, Tommy thinks, rolling over to his side and wincing as he presses on one half-healed bruise by accident. He hadn't thought it could be so nice.

He wants to keep it. Wilbur's not allowed to leave. He's Tommy's. The only issue is the rest of his stupid family; Tommy scowls at the thought of them, Technoblade and Phil. Not because he hates them— just because they got to know Wilbur first. That's not fair. Tommy deserves to know Wilbur like they do. He'll make it happen. He will. Besides, he's got Wilbur wrapped around his thumb. One look from Tommy has the guy going all gooey and pliable. He'd probably kill someone if Tommy asked.

Huh.

That warm feeling deep in his chest, the one that pops up whenever he thinks that: *Wilbur would kill for me.*

Yeah, *that* feels like love.

His next shift is two days later. And when a familiar car pulls into the lot, Tommy can't help but feel a little bit of glee. Wilbur, here to joke and make his day at least a tiny bit better.

When the door jingles, though, it's not Wilbur.

It's all three of them, and while he feels a jump of happiness in his chest, he can't help but be a bit peeved. He likes it when it's just Wilbur. The banter comes easier, the jokes land harder. With Technoblade and Phil around, Tommy still feels like he's on eggshells.

That doesn't stop Wilbur, though.

"Hey, man," he says as Tommy approaches their table. It's a slow afternoon— there's only two other tables currently seated right now, and a couple people at the counter. Tommy slips them all a menu. "What's popping?"

"You sound old as fuck, Wil," Tommy informs him. "Nobody says that."

"Nobody but me," Wilbur bites back, and Tommy smiles.

"What's wrong with being old?" Phil cuts in, and Tommy turns to look. He squints at the older man, who in reality is probably not that old (definitely not old enough to have two sons in their twenties, but Tommy's not about to comment on that garbage fire, no way) but definitely old-er.

"Everything," Tommy says. "Your back aches. You're not caught up with the slang. You sit in the same old armchair for hours every day and watch the morning, daily, and evening news. You're probably conservative."

"Damn, Phil," Technoblade says, "he just wrecked you."

"You look like a strong wind could take you out," Tommy tacks on for good measure, and that's the comment that has Wilbur nearly on the floor laughing and Technoblade smirking. Phil merely just rests his head in his palm, staring forlornly at the table.

"I'm writing all three of you out of my will," he says, in that sharp tone that's still joking. Tommy grins.

"I was in your will?" He asks.

"Phil's a philanthropist," Wilbur says, composing himself in an instant in order to inform Tommy of this very important fact. Tommy waits a second, just the right amount of time for it to be really funny, and asks:

"What, like Socrates?"

That sends all *three* of them spiraling, Wilbur desperately trying to explain the difference between philosophy and philanthropy like Tommy doesn't already know— after three separate wheezing fits, he finally just grins and slides into the booth next to Technoblade. That shuts at least Techno up, glancing over.

“Aren’t you on shift?” He asks.

“Yeah,” Tommy says, tapping his foot and feeling the seat get all stuck to his pants in the sticky way vinyl does. “Only got three tables though, and they’ll be fine for a couple minutes.”

“You know, Wilbur’s been talking about you a lot,” Phil says, which prompts Wilbur to lean over and elbow him in the ribs. Through the pain, Phil grits out: “It’s nice to know all the praises have been fairly accurate.”

“Phil,” Wilbur says, then honey-sweet: “*Dad* . Shut up. Pretty please.”

“Of course Wil doesn’t shut up about me,” Tommy says, feeling his chest swell a little bit with pride. “I’m great.”

“And modest,” Technoblade says.

“Incredibly.” Tommy tips his head to look at him. “Do you want coffee?”

Technoblade regards him right back, body angled slightly away in order to keep space between them in the booth. “This feels weird.”

“Should I get up?”

“Yeah, probably.”

Tommy listens, sliding out of the booth and that’s probably a good thing because Skeppy is glaring at him from behind the counter. He sighs, brushing his hands off on his pants, and shakes his head.

“Well, boys,” he says, “I’ll put in your usuals, yeah?”

“Please and thanks,” Phil smiles at him. “And Tommy, if you ever need anything—”

“I don’t,” Tommy says gently. “But thanks.” Well, that had come out of nowhere. Phil is still smiling at him even as he turns to go, and he can feel Technoblade’s gaze on the back of his head. Creepy fucker. He’s got eyes like lasers, burning two holes into the back of Tommy’s skull as he putszes around in the kitchen. Whatever. He’d prefer if it was just Wilbur, yes, but maybe his family isn’t so bad.

Especially not when Phil tips him a crisp forty bucks. Fuck yeah.

The pattern continues: days will pass where only Wilbur comes into the diner. Tommy goes home, faces a monster, and then returns for his shifts because even Perseus must’ve had a day job or something. Once every couple days or so, the whole Watson-Soot clan shows up and Tommy entertains them. They always come when it’s slow— it lends itself to knowing them, to, perhaps, loving. There is a routine and then, there’s not.

The door jingles. It's about time for Wilbur to come in, so Tommy turns towards the door and whips the towel down in his hand, a *greetings, bitch boy!* halfway out of his mouth before he takes in the person walking in.

Pink hair pulled up tight against his skull, wispy flyaways framing his face as the rest is pulled into a knotted bun. A white shirt and pants, dark black and high on his waist. A red belt. Technoblade looks fucking pretentious as hell. Tommy tells him as much when he goes over to greet him, sliding a menu in front of him and a glass of water.

"You look pretentious as shit," he says jovially, ignoring how Technoblade looks up at him with a dead stare. They've never interacted one-on-one before. Tommy finds himself both utterly thrilled and nervous. Sue him— the dude seems cool. "Can I get you anything to start with?"

"Coffee," Technoblade says. "That's all, thanks."

"Sounds good." Tommy turns to go, but before he can, Technoblade reaches out and splays his hand against the table.

"Wait," he says. "I'd like to ask you a question."

Tommy lingers. "Okay..." he says, and then nods when Technoblade still doesn't speak. The older man is silent, then looks away, breaking eye contact and shifting his gaze to the wall instead. Tommy squints at him.

"Do you enjoy Wilbur's company?" He finally asks, slow and specific, like he's picking his words out of a bin inside his head and making a careful decision over each one.

"Is... this some kind of shovel talk?" Tommy asks, and Technoblade blinks.

"No," he says, and it seems genuine, but Tommy can't read him as well as he can Wilbur. He stares at him, but Technoblade does not look him in the eyes again. "Wilbur can be a bit much, sometimes. If he's bothering you—" well, he is, but not in a bad way, "—I can tell him to back off."

"Yeah?" Tommy asks, throat dry. He licks his lips. Technoblade's arm relaxes, and Tommy tilts his head. Interesting. "If I said he was annoying me, you'd make him stop? You'd all stop?"

"It'd be one hell of an argument, but yes, I would," Technoblade says.

Tommy hums.

"It's fine," he says, after mulling over the idea of it. Wilbur is annoying, yes, but Tommy likes the attention and anyways, Wilbur is his now. Technoblade surely must know what that feels like, since they're twins and all. Wilbur had let it slip a week ago, one of those late nights where he'd been prattling on about nothing and everything at all while thinking Tommy wasn't paying attention. Tommy would kill to have a twin— someone who was yours, entirely and utterly, someone who would be at your side always. Even just a sibling would

do. Wilbur's on his way there, but... it's different. He catches Technoblade in his gaze and then drops it, looking at his shoes and the dirty floor. "I don't mind it."

"You're sure?"

"Yes, you ginormous garbage heap." Tommy rolls his eyes. "Do you want anything to eat, or can I go?"

Technoblade glances down at the menu in front of him and then, after a second, slides it back towards Tommy.

"I'm good," he says. "Just a coffee."

"It'll be right out," Tommy promises, and then flees before he can lose any more of his nerves. Behind the counter is a safe space, somewhere only he can go and it makes him feel better just by stepping onto the tile instead of the carpet. If Wilbur is a snake, Technoblade is a mountain lion. Silent footsteps for a creature so large, a piercing gaze that will make you think something is watching, and a haunting howl that intimidates even the most seasoned of hunters. Tommy watches him from across the room, hiding behind the cash register and peeking up above it as he absently fiddles with the coffeemaker. Techno is just sitting there, hands in front of him. No phone out, just glancing around the room and taking it all in. Tommy watches as the man shifts in his seat and then blinks, turning his head slowly.

Tommy has enough time to move, but he doesn't. He stays where he is and meets Techno's eyes when the man looks over to find him staring. He thinks he should be frightened, but he isn't. Not one bit. After a moment of staring, the coffee machine beeps, and Tommy is drawn back into work.

He leaves Technoblade's coffee on the table in a rush, and doesn't get back to him for an hour with the check. Not once does he complain— he just watches.

At the end of the hour, however, he finally has to stop by. Tommy has a small break in-between tables and skids to a stop in front of Techno's table, placing down the receipt paper and check with ease. Techno scoops it up, card in hand (he's always been good about having it ready even when the whole trio of them are here, honestly) and Tommy waits for him to set it down so he can take it. But there's a slight issue— a pause, a hold. Someone takes a breath and does not let it go. Techno falters before he sets the check down, and Tommy waits, watching as the older man keeps his hand over the leather and tips his head.

"Did you get into a fight?" He asks. It's the first words they've spoken in nearly an hour. Tommy blinks. What? Techno raises a brow and gestures to his upper arm, and Tommy turns to look and shit— his sleeve had ridden up, exposing the yellow-green nasty old bruise from when he'd talked back and Dream had thrown him to the ground so hard he'd had a mark on his bicep. It's mostly faded now. Carefully, Tommy reaches up and shrugs his sleeve down so it covers it up again.

"Something like that," Tommy says. Techno is staring at him, not his face, his arm, and Tommy shifts uneasily on his feet. After a moment, his fingers lift just enough from the check for Tommy to reach out and snatch it away. "Have a nice day."

“You too,” Techno says, but his voice is on autopilot and Tommy knows it is but he forces himself away before anything else can stop him. Escape, through the booths and behind the counter to where it’s safe and where Niki pins him down in her gaze and asks him a silent question. He shrugs back, skidding to a stop at the register and tucking away the receipt with Techno’s—

Techno’s signature, and beside that, a scrawled note, handwriting loopy and pretentious and stupid. Tommy freezes, staring down at it and drinking the words in.

Don’t spend it all in one place.

Beside that is a phone number. And tucked in between the receipt and leather casing is a hundred dollar bill.

Over the course of an hour, he’d ordered *one* coffee. It had cost him \$2.75. What the fuck.

“Tommy?” Niki asks, and Tommy plucks the bill from it’s spot and shoves it away before she can see. He can’t accept this. He has to give it back. They already tip stupidly high, and this is just— this is insulting, is what it is. Tommy *can’t take this* . He glances up, gaze scouring the room, but the Watson-Soot booth is already empty.

“I’m fine,” he says. After a moment, he tucks the receipt into his pocket too, the phone number burning a hole into the fabric of his pants. His chest is tight. He can’t breathe. He keeps the hundred dollars in his pocket, thumbing over it for hours until he makes his decision.

“What the fuck is this?” Tommy asks, slamming the crumpled receipt and hundred dollars on the counter in front of Techno. The man blinks.

“Paper,” he notes. “With ink on it.”

“Don’t play stupid,” Tommy snarls. He shoves it forward. “I can’t take this.”

Dream would kill him. Tommy can’t owe this man a debt, he doesn’t think. Not when he needs Wilbur like he does. Not when he needs all of them like he does. Techno blinks again, long and slow, and tips his head up to look at him with that stupid piercing gaze.

“Why not?” He asks.

“I—” Tommy stutters to a halt. He knows why he can’t. But admitting it out loud is... embarrassing. He cares what Techno thinks of him, he does. He wants the other to like him, and Tommy thinks... Tommy thinks Techno *likes* seeing him embarrassed. The way his eyes catch on Tommy’s ears, his cheeks, flushed red. An idea hits him, just then. “You can’t—”

“Yeah?” Techno asks, and he sounds amused. Tommy lets it rile him up. Maybe it’s what Techno wants.

“I don’t have a phone,” he admits, the admission bursting forth like a tidal wave. Techno’s expression doesn’t change.

“Okay,” he says.

“And I don’t need the money,” Tommy lies. Now Techno’s face shifts, a brow arching high.

“Bruh,” he says. “Yes you do. Your sneakers are falling apart.”

“I– excuse you– fuck– you!” Tommy sputters, and Techno cracks a grin, pulling his hands into his lap and Tommy just wants to punch him. “That was so fucking rude! I don’t need your handouts!”

“But you *want* them,” Techno says slyly, and Tommy stammers to a halt again, brain blue-screening. The urge to let his voice rise in pitch and screech at him is nearly unbearable. But there are other patrons, and Techno is just smiling like he *knows* .

“Fuck you,” Tommy says, anger burning through him like a flame. “I’m going to spit in your coffee.”

The worst part is, Tommy does want it. He wants the crisp bill, tucked so deeply into his jeans pocket only he can access it. He wants new shoes, he wants a phone to put the number into, he wants it all. He wants Techno to smile at him like that again, like Tommy is just some amusing little bug on the wall and he’s intrigued. The thing is, Tommy’s not sure when that interest will wane– and when it does (because it always does) he will be indebted.

Maybe he just needs to make sure the interest *doesn’t* wane.

He wonders if he can do that.

“Five stars on TripAdvisor. The wait staff are so charming,” Techno drawls, oblivious to Tommy’s most genius thought. What if he makes them want to stay? What if he plays into every little game, shies away, gives them what they want?

Techno wants a fight. Wilbur wants a game. Phil wants to dote.

He can let them do that, right? He can give them each what they want, and in turn they’ll never let him go. They’ll think they won, in the end, but no. In reality, *Tommy* will have won. He’ll have played their games and left them all in the dust. By the time he was done with them, they’d be wrapped around his pinky fuckin’ finger. Willingly or not.

And Techno wants a fight.

Tommy turns, grabbing a mug from the rack. He snags a coffee pot, fills it to the brim, and then turns. Makes eye contact with Techno as he gathers up spittle in his cheek like a chipmunk, and then spits. It floats on the top of the drink, a bubbly wad of saliva. He smiles, and then sets the mug down in front of Techno. He makes sure to place the drink right on top of the money and receipt with Techno’s phone number, leaving a stain as the coffee drips down the side. Customer-service voice, on.

“On the house,” he says, and Techno’s face is impassive, but Tommy can see underneath it. The older man is pissed, but in a good way. There’s a sick sort of approval there.

“Thanks,” Techno says, and he doesn’t touch the mug. Tommy flashes him a grin, and then turns to go make the rounds of his tables.

Techno leaves, at some point. The mug of coffee with spit in it is still there when Tommy goes to clean up, but the money and receipt are gone. Tommy won. He knows there will be backlash, a bid for revenge, but he played into Techno’s hand and won. It’s a thrill. He dumps the ruined coffee down the sink and feels giddy.

His shift is over, and Tommy heads home. Saturdays mean work and then home and hiding in his room until dinner, hiding until Dream tells him to come out and avoiding a fight if he can.

Today is a good day until it isn’t.

Dream never hits where Tommy can’t cover it. He’s learned over the years, learned that beating a black eye into Tommy means Tommy missing school and now work, and means people check in on them. Dream wants them to be left alone, so the bruises never creep any further past where his sleeves and pants can cover. Cuts and stinging slices across skin that can be hidden, and glass in his knees, not his palms.

By the time Sunday morning rolls around and Tommy can drag himself up at 3:30, forcing himself to be silent so he doesn’t wake up Dream, his whole body is fucking sore as hell.

It wasn’t even anything huge. Tommy thinks Dream could just sense he felt victorious and wanted to ruin it. He wouldn’t be surprised.

The diner is dark but he has the keys and the lights flicker on, pale fluorescent lining the tiles in the back. Tommy patches himself up here; caught in the moments between day and night, fifteen minutes before Jack shows up and starts warming the stovetops. At three fifty-six, the door bell jingles.

“Jack,” Tommy says without looking up from his spot behind the counter, the tiles cool against his bruised and beaten skin. He probably shouldn’t be lying on the floor— who the fuck knows what’s been on it? “We’re nearly out of milk, gonna have to make a run.”

There’s a hum. A voice that Tommy knows isn’t Jack Manifold, his good friend and coworker, so Tommy is immediately on edge. He shoots to his feet, tugging down his sleeves and glaring through the back to the front.

In front of the register stands Phil Watson-Soot.

“We’re not open,” Tommy says instantly. “Go away.”

“The customer service here is impeccable,” Phil says and what is with their family and *saying that*. His eyes crinkle when he smiles. Tommy swallows. “Don’t worry, I’m not here for

long. I just wanted to catch you before anyone else.” He says the word *catch* like it’s part of the long con, part of the game. Phil looks like a measly old man on the outside, but Tommy can hear the thrumming. Like war drums underneath his skin– Phil is dangerous. Phil is deadly.

“Why?” Tommy asks, coming around from the kitchen to behind the counter. Phil is still smiling.

“Techno told me last night you don’t have a phone,” he says, and then there’s a package on the counter, plastic and cardboard. “I got you–”

“No.”

He can’t help himself. He knows there’s a game he’s playing here, a war to win, but this is too much. Too much, too soon. What had he been thinking earlier? Phil wanted to dote– this is doting, this is a gift, and Tommy would be indebted. It’s not even a cheap phone. It’s an iPhone, still wrapped in plastic and sealed. Brand new, one of the latest models.

“Take it,” Phil says. “You need a phone, Tommy.”

“I don’t need shit, bitch,” he snaps, and there’s a frantic flicker of worry behind Phil’s eyes for a moment and he inhales, then sighs.

“You need a phone,” he says. “Trust me. You do. For school. The way the world works these days, you really do.”

“No, no no no, no.” Tommy is firm.

“Tommy,” Phil says. “I’m just going to leave it here. You deserve one, it’s the least I can do.”

Tommy knows this game.

He’d googled it once. They called it love-bombing– Dream had been more open to the technique when Tommy was smaller, giving him gifts and hugging him and using nice words instead of cruel ones. He’d hit Tommy but then he’d pet through his hair and tell him sorry and say he would never do it again, as long as Tommy was good. Love bombing. A destructive force mixed in with the painful heartbeats in his chest. Tommy knows it when he sees it, and he is being so fucking good for Phil and Wil and Techno; there’s no way they don’t know what they’re doing. The only problem is, Tommy also knows. He’s supposed to be winning, flipping the script on it’s head and making them *his* and instead of letting them take him as *theirs*. Their methods shouldn’t be working, especially when he can spot the red flags a hundred miles away.

But Phil sounds so sincere, so simple. Like fact is fact, and the fact is that Phil knows better than Tommy does on this matter. He does need a phone.

“I can’t,” he says, because he’s losing whatever control he thought he had and is now grasping for it back. “My guardian–” Not going to call him dad, or brother, no time to explain their fucked up relationship to Phil, “–he doesn’t let me.”

“Why not?” Phil asks. Prying. Tone light to cover the curiosity.

“I’m not old enough,” Tommy lies. Dream just wants complete and utter control over Tommy’s life. Easier to lie now and beg for forgiveness later. “I gotta wait ‘til I’m 18.”

“How old are you?” Phil asks, looking utterly perplexed.

“17,” Tommy admits.

“Until when?”

“April.”

“Yeah, fuck that shit,” Phil says, and he puts the phone down on the counter in front of them both. “Your guardian’s an idiot.” Tommy gapes. “Take the phone. Hide it, if you have to. I’ll pay the bills until you turn 18 so you can keep it. Seriously, Tommy. Everyone needs a phone. What if you got into trouble?”

“I wouldn’t get into trouble,” Tommy says, inflicting the words with such utter exasperation that he’s sure Phil understands. The only trouble for him these days is unavoidable in the halls of his own home. “Seriously, Phil,” he mocks. “I’m not taking that.”

“You are,” Phil says gently. “I know you want it.”

“What is with you lot and thinking you know what I fucking want?” Tommy asks, throwing his hands in the air and turning around in a circle with a glare towards the ceiling. “I could want fuck-all and you wouldn’t know! I could want to hula hoop in a grass skirt and you’d be none the wiser! You—” He whips around, stabbing an accusing finger at Phil, “— have no idea what I want.”

Phil is silent. They stand there, staring at each other. Tommy’s chest is heaving.

Then Phil moves forward, and Tommy flinches back.

Again, both of them come to a dead stop. Phil’s face is sad, but it’s always sad, and so that means bull-fucking-shit. Tommy likes playing the mind games, he does, but it’s almost five in the fucking morning and he’s exhausted. His brain hurts. There are butterflies in his skull, colored pink and green and orange. Tommy’s having trouble sorting out any blue between them.

“Tommy,” Phil says after a second. “You know Wilbur cares about you.”

“Yeah,” Tommy says, and his hands are shaking minutely. Just enough that he can hide it, spreading them down his pants and wiping his palms roughly on the denim. “Yeah, I do.”

“So do I,” Phil says quietly. “So does Techno.”

“I’m your favorite waiter,” Tommy says, scoffing lightly.

“You’re our favorite friend,” Phil says. “And if you ever needed help– if you ever, *ever* needed anything– we would be here for you.” Yeah, Tommy’s heard that one before. Dream said it, back when he’d first adopted Tommy. He knows how this kind of love works– a fast-burning candle. Tommy is the unfortunate wick.

And yet. “Does that include a thousand dollar phone?” he asks, glancing down at the offending article of technology on the counter. The plastic wrap shines, unbroken and gleaming.

“Yeah,” Phil says. “It does. It’s got our numbers on it.”

Phil wants to dote. Phil wants to see a vulnerable piece of Tommy, and he wants to make it *better*.

Tommy reaches out and takes the phone.

Phil’s shoulders visibly relax. Hell, the man even takes a step back away from Tommy like he’s a wild animal, some kind of creature to be tamed and not a kid with a mind of his own. He holds back a satisfied scowl, because genuinely he is satisfied. Phil has seen an ugly part of him and reacted accordingly. Reacted right. Phil’s passed a test even if he has no idea about it. Good on him, Tommy thinks. Didn’t even have to study. He shoves the phone under the counter. He can deal with it later when he isn’t busy opening up the diner and waiting for an increasingly toeing-the-line on late Jack Manifold, and when Phil isn’t hovering like a mother bird over her nest. He shoves his hands in his pockets once it’s safe below, and runs his fingers over the receipt that had Techno’s number on it. Huh. Perfect.

“Can I get you a coffee for the road?” he asks.

“Tommy,” Wilbur says.

“Wilbur,” Tommy says.

“Tommy.”

“Wil-bah.”

“Tomathy.”

“Wilbster.”

“That’s a new one.” Wilbur’s laugh is infectious, the man himself a regular old Typhoid Mary of delirious joy. Tommy loves him. Loves him, loves him, loves him. “Timmy?”

“Absolutely not,” Tommy bites back, and nevermind, he does not love Wilbur. “My name is *Tommy*, thank you very much. I’ll revoke your pie privileges, bitch.”

“Not my pie privilege,” Wilbur laments. “Whatever shall I do? Beg our beloved Niki herself for a slice of heaven?”

“Don’t bring me into this,” Niki warns from behind the counter, and Tommy grins. The diner is empty— it is nearing closing on a slow Tuesday night, and Wilbur currently occupies the Watson-Soot booth. He’s got sheets of music strewn about him, and across from him sits Technoblade with various history books and research papers intermixed with Wilbur’s. (Phil is absent. Busy with work, Wil had said.) They’d chatted about college for a bit, but now the man is leaning heavily on the table with four empty mugs and a laptop in front of him, typing slowly but surely away. Tommy has taken to leaning against Wilbur, his back pressed to Wil’s shoulder, and annoying him. Most of his work is done anyways— there’s nothing to do but indulge.

“Oh Niki,” Wilbur hums, “our darling Niki, how sweet, the sound.”

“That’s *Amazing Grace*,” Tommy says. “You’re a shit singer.”

“That’s not what you said when I sent you the demo of Vienna,” Wilbur shoots back, and Tommy curls his knees to his chest. His brand new iPhone is on the table, screen facing down, although now it’s not all that new. It’s been a few weeks, actually, since Phil had given it to him. And he’s amassed a good few numbers on it. Three contacts to four, to five to six, eventually to nine. Tommy hadn’t even thought nine people had cared about him, let alone enough to get his number and promise not to call him too late at night. He’d been hiding it from Dream fairly easily— it’s a small, slick machine, easy to tuck into pockets and sleeves. Silent is a must when he’s home, but he takes time out of his day to go for a walk and listen to anything Wilbur sends him. TikToks, music demos, YouTube videos. Holy shit, Tommy *loves* YouTube. How the fuck was he living without it before?

How had he been living without Wilbur before? Tommy’s life has been separated into two, now: the Before and After. Before had been dull and empty, but now in the After Tommy is finally fucking happy. Genuinely. He feels like one of those Hallmark movie stars now— his type of love is good, but this is so much better. His plan had worked. The Watson-Soots are fully and utterly enamored with him, one of them coming around for every one of his shifts now. They only really hang out at the diner, but Tommy plans to change that soon enough. It’s only a matter of time, honestly. He leans against Wilbur and thinks of Vienna, a song Wilbur had sent to him crooning of foreign cities and band-aids on cheeks and trench coats with pockets so deep you can fit oceans into them. It really had been good; it’s why now, Tommy just sputters at Wilbur’s retort.

“Fuck you,” he says. Wilbur just laughs.

“That the best you can come up with?” he asks, and Tommy turns and cranes his neck in order to stick his tongue out at him.

“I’ll ask Jack to piss in your soup,” Tommy says cheerfully. “And he’s the type of bloke to do it, too.”

“Duly noted,” Wilbur says, chuckling lightly to himself and marking something down on the music sheet below him. Tommy smiles. Headlights from passing cars outside shine on the

wall as they pass, the dim yellow glow of streetlights shining through the windows. He leans his head back until it bumps against Wilbur's, but the other doesn't say a word.

Tommy is happy.

And there's only a little ways left to go.

He gets home that night late, because Niki had insisted they all stay after and have Wilbur play a song for them. He'd pulled a guitar out of their fancy-ass car and strummed it, and the concert had been lovely, but now Tommy is late coming home. It's usually no issue— he can make excuses and say shit to get out of it, but the minute he steps in the front door something is off in the house. The air is colder. The hairs on his neck rise. Tommy creeps through the dark front hall, down past the dim kitchen and through the quiet house. No one has caught him yet. He's so close, so close to relative safety of his bedroom when:

"Tommy," Dream says, and Tommy freezes.

"Yeah?" He asks, turning, mouth going dry. He's caught on the precipice of the doorway, between the safety of his room and the hallway. Dream stands at the end of the hall, and then something clicks and he's outlined by the sudden flash of kitchen light, warm and yellow. It halos around his head, golden hair glimmering in the light. Darker than Tommy's own, but similar enough.

"How was work?" Dream asks. Tommy blinks. Dream never asks that. He never asks anything, really, which is why Tommy is allowed to get away with shit outside all the time. He feels the heaviness of his new phone in his pocket, hidden by his hoodie. The new sneakers hidden in the garage, the trinkets, the money— he has to know. The thought paralyzes Tommy.

"Fine," he manages to say. "Long. Had to stay after."

Dream hums. Tommy can't make out the expression on his face in the dark. Then, after an eternity: "Send in your two weeks notice tomorrow."

"What?"

"You heard me." Dream steps out of the kitchen and into the shadows, face coming into focus and darkening. Tommy steps back. "Send in your two weeks tomorrow. You're working too much."

"I need the money, Dream," Tommy says after a second of shock. He can't lose this job. It's the only thing keeping him afloat now; that, and the Watson-Soots. "I— I need the— I mean, can't I just cut down on hours maybe? I can switch shifts with, uhm, with Niki—"

“You’re quitting,” Dream says quietly. Tommy’s mouth snaps shut. “I want you to focus on school this semester. Bring your grades up.”

Tommy doesn’t bite back the instinctive response, “I’m second in my class.”

“And that’s not good enough!” Dream’s voice raises, then settles. “Tommy. You’re quitting. And if you don’t hand it in tomorrow, I’ll lock you in and call them myself. Understand?”

He’s gotten lazy. Slacking, lately. Being around Wilbur especially has made Tommy let his guard down.

“Fuck off,” he says instinctively, and in less than a second he’s realized his mistake. “Wait, no, no no no, I didn’t mean— Dream, I’m sorry—”

“See what I fucking mean?” Dream snaps, storming down the hall as Tommy stumbles backwards into his room. A hand lashes out, grips his wrist, bruisingly hard. “Don’t you think I notice shit, Tommy? Don’t you think I pay attention?” Fuck, fuck, fuck— Tommy twists, but Dream’s grip is like a vice. “You’ve been hiding things from me, and working every day for hours. You’re avoiding me.” His voice gets slimy, and Tommy inhales, then exhales. “Me. Poor old me, who has to sit in the dark at home and wait for you to get back. I *miss* you, Tommy.”

That’s a lie. It’s a lie, but Tommy can’t talk back, but he is anyway. “You’re a liar,” he spits, fear lacing his voice. “Stop it! Dream! You’re hurting me—”

He hears it before he realizes what happens. A sharp noise, like the crack of a whip, and then Tommy is staring to the side at his wall and Dream’s hand hangs in the air in the corner of his vision. His cheek burns— the pain comes secondary to the fire, to the shock coursing through his system. His face aches.

“I’m losing you,” Dream whispers a second later, and in the dark of his bedroom his eyes almost glint when Tommy looks up at him. “I’m losing you, aren’t I?”

“No,” Tommy says, trying to damage control. What does he like to hear? “No, I’m with you, I’m— Dream, we’re in this together.”

“You ruined my life,” Dream says quietly, louder than a whisper but still soft. Tommy’s cheek stings as though it’s been dragged through a thousand nettles. His wrist aches. “You ruined my life, and now I’m losing you. Can you even imagine everything I gave up for you?” Tommy shakes his head, trying to stagger backwards. Dream’s gaze is like a lazar, locking him in place and making his fingers tremble. “Everything I did was for you and now you just want to leave?”

“I’m not leaving,” Tommy whispers hoarsely, though he wishes for nothing except to launch himself out the nearest window. “Dream, I’m sorry, I’ll quit, I’ll quit if it makes you happy, I’m sorry.”

“ *You* don’t make me happy,” Dream snaps, and then Tommy’s wrist is free and he staggers all the way back until the backs of his knees hit his bed. Dream scowls, and then something

shifts in his pocket and slips and clatters to the floor. Both of them look down— Tommy a second later, just late enough to see how Dream's face goes slack and cold.

His phone lies on the ground, still without a case, face down. Distantly, Tommy thinks: *I hope it didn't crack.*

“Where,” Dream says, voice level and dangerous, “the fuck did you get that?”

“Dream,” Tommy pleads. He doesn't have any time.

“Where the fuck did you get that?” Dream repeats. Tommy is so fucked.

“I bought it,” he lies. “With— with paychecks. Money. My money.”

“Liar,” Dream says smoothly, whipping his head to pin him in his gaze. A butterfly to board, Tommy's wings are spread and he's caught, he's pinned, he's so fucking dead.

He wants Wilbur.

He wants Wilbur to come and wrap him up under one arm, to laugh and tell him it'll be okay. He wants what he's claimed as *his*, but he can't even try and quietly call him because his phone is on the floor and Dream is— Dream is taking a step forward and he looks so angry that Tommy doesn't think. He just panics and runs, feet moving before he can stop himself. He feints to the left and then goes right when Dream tries to catch him, ducking under his elbow and chucking his body through the doorway. It's like he's above himself, watching his body as he moves through the house and stumbles through the hallway towards the front door. Away from Dream, the golden light of the kitchen catching him in it's light as he passes. Dream is shouting behind him, angry threats and insults, but Tommy is out the door before he can grab him.

He's running. Bare feet against concrete and gravel, the tiny rocks digging into his heels and stinging. He can barely feel it— adrenaline pumps through his veins as he sprints down the street, passing underneath street lamp after street lamp with the wind whipping through his ears, filling his ears until he can't hear anything else. He can't hear anything else.

Dream's shouting has stopped by the time he dares to stop running, on a distant street corner. He chokes on his own breath, leaning over with his hands on his knees and breath coming fast and shaky, desperate. He can't hear Dream shouting anymore.

He's so tired.

He can't go back. Going back is a death sentence, but he left his phone and his shoes and his emergency cash there— he's barefoot in the middle of the road in the dark, without even his keys. He still can't go back. Dream will kill him. Guess it's time to move up the schedule a bit.

He goes to the only place he can think of: the diner.

It's closed now— in fact, Tommy was the one who locked the doors. But he's been working there for two years and he knows *all* the secrets. Every single one, including the loose

window in the back that leads into the kitchen, just above the sink. All it takes is a little bit of prying and the screen pops off, and then Tommy just has to jimmy the lock until the window slides upwards. He clambers in, landing on the nasty tile with his bare feet and ignoring the chill. Through the dark kitchen, out to the counter. Only a few hours ago he was sitting in the booth in the back, happy and content. Now, everything is different. He's moving on autopilot and without thinking, disarms the alarm on the front door. Then picks up the phone and stares down at it.

With one trembling hand, he presses in the only number he can seem to remember.

The phone rings. And rings. And rings.

Finally, someone picks up.

“ullo?” The voice on the other end sounds groggy, as though he's just woken up. Tommy can't bring himself to feel bad about it. He forces as much upset into his voice as he can manage, which, considering everything isn't very difficult.

“Techno,” he sobs.

They get there faster than Tommy thought humanly possible. He sits in the dark of the diner and waits, the sticky plastic of the booth beneath his hands and feet and leans his head against the window until he sees the headlights coming, pulling into the parking lot and not even bothering to find a spot. They just pull up to the front and Tommy pushes himself out of the booth, but he barely gets two steps towards the door before Wilbur is throwing it open. He's in his pajamas— they all are, Phil, Techno, and him. Sweatpants and a too-big shirt that's got the faded logo of some band on it. He's wearing slippers. Techno isn't wearing his glasses. Phil's hair is loose.

Wilbur scoops him up into a hug before he can say a thing, arms warm around him and caging him in like a bird. He lets him— he lets him hold him, and stays quiet as the door shuts with a jingle.

“Techno, turn on the light,” Wilbur instructs, his voice muffled by Tommy's hair. After a second and some footsteps, the lights flick on. Tommy blinks furiously as it floods his eyes and Wilbur pulls away just for a moment, eyes scanning him and catching on his face. He worries his bottom lip between his teeth, one hand coming up hesitantly.

Tommy nods.

“Will it bruise?” He asks as Wilbur ghosts his fingers over his still-sore cheek.

“Are those fucking fingerprints?” Phil says sharply from behind Wilbur and Tommy stiffens. Wilbur is quiet, his eyes still on Tommy's face as he inspects, fingers tracing down his neck and then stopping there.

“Where are your shoes?” Techno asks, voice low. Tommy shakes his head.

“I didn’t take anything,” he says, throat clogged. “I just– went.”

“It’s not your fault, mate,” Phil says gently, and Tommy shuts his eyes. He wants to weep.

Because this is it. He’s *won* .

He gambled for them, gambled the danger for their protection and *look* at them. They came when he called even though it’s– it’s nearly midnight. He woke Techno up, dragged all three of them out of bed and they came. They dropped everything for him. It’s what he wanted down to the T, and the T is Tommy because Tommy fucking won.

A laugh rips it’s way out of his throat before he can stop it, and all three sets of concerned eyes grow even more concerned. He wants to sob. He wants to laugh.

“Tommy?” Wilbur asks, and Tommy just shakes his head.

“I’m done,” he says. It’s the truth. He’s won– there’s nothing left to be done. He’s finished. “I want to go home.”

“I’m not letting you go back there,” Wilbur hisses and Tommy chokes out another sob-laugh, because he’s misunderstanding. He shakes his head. His home isn’t with Dream and it hasn’t been for a while– they just needed to catch up.

“With you,” he mutters, and he can pinpoint the moment when Wilbur realizes, eyes snapping open and then going impossibly soft.

“Oh,” he says, then, “yes, yes, of course. Techno, the car–”

“Pretty sure Phil left it running,” Techno drawls, and Tommy laughs because holy shit, he did that. He made those worried faces. He’s the reason their fancy ass Tesla is out front with the engine still running. They ran to *him* .

It’s heady, a powerful rush of victory. Tommy buries his head into Wilbur’s shoulder and laughs so hard he sobs. He will make it so they never stop running to him.

They take him home.

He *wins*.

“I think he passed out,” Techno says an undetermined amount of time later. Tommy is leaning against the window, eyes shut, mouth half-open as his forehead leans against the cold glass and is pillowed just slightly by his seatbelt. Wilbur is in the back with him– hasn’t let go of his hand, really.

“Yeah?” Wilbur asks, voice low but snarky. “You think?”

Even from the passenger seat, Techno can see the dried tear tracks on Tommy's face.

"He's had a bad day," Phil says absently, glancing into the rearview. "Poor thing."

"You got what you wanted, Wil," Techno says casually. "He came. Right to us."

"Of course he did," Wilbur says, and Tommy shifts just minisculely, and all of them shut up. But then he sighs, and settles, and Phil heaves a sigh of his own. "We've been getting him to trust us for ages. I'd be concerned if he didn't."

"All that work," Phil says, slightly amused. Techno hums.

"I can't wait for him to see his room," Wilbur muses. "The paint smell is almost gone by now. I hope we got the shade right."

"I'm sure he'll like it," Phil says, glancing back again. As nonchalant as he's being, Techno knows he's just as ecstatic. They all are. "It's from us, after all. And once he's settled, we can handle the... other problem."

Tommy's poor excuse for a guardian.

Yeah, even just thinking about him makes Techno want to snarl.

"Cut the ties," Wilbur hums. "Snap the... cords. A fresh start for all of us, maybe." He reaches up, tucks a curl of Tommy's behind his ear. "I'm so pleased he's working out."

"Just like we wanted," Techno murmurs, and fixes his eyes on the road ahead of them. Almost home.

In the darkness of the car, no one sees the way Tommy's lips curl up, just a bit. Just enough.

Chapter End Notes

how are you feeling.....?

hopefully manipulated! if u think this is a good ending at all tbh my subtle manipulation tactics have WORKED! surprise! i got you!!!! your brain has been squished around by yours truly and you have fallen prey to the narcissism and techniques for emotional manipulation that i googled and then implemented. no one is safe. not even sbi. not even tommy.

genuinely hope you enjoyed this tho. if i ever add onto it (which i might, or i might do other things similar) please feel free to PRIME SUBSCRIBE to my ao3 or bookmark this series, black mambo!

also if you wanna **support me and my endeavors**, consider leaving a kudos and a comment :) there is no production without feedback ngl

or you can come talk to me on my [twitter](#) (WE JUST HIT 1k FOLLOWERS!) or [tumblr](#)! i also have a cool [discord](#) server with a lot of awesome people !!!!! we recently hit 100 members so :) come hang and be awesome in the birdhouse with us (get it cause bluejays are birds and- its a house for- yeah okay)

End Notes

chapter two will be up on wednesday ;)

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